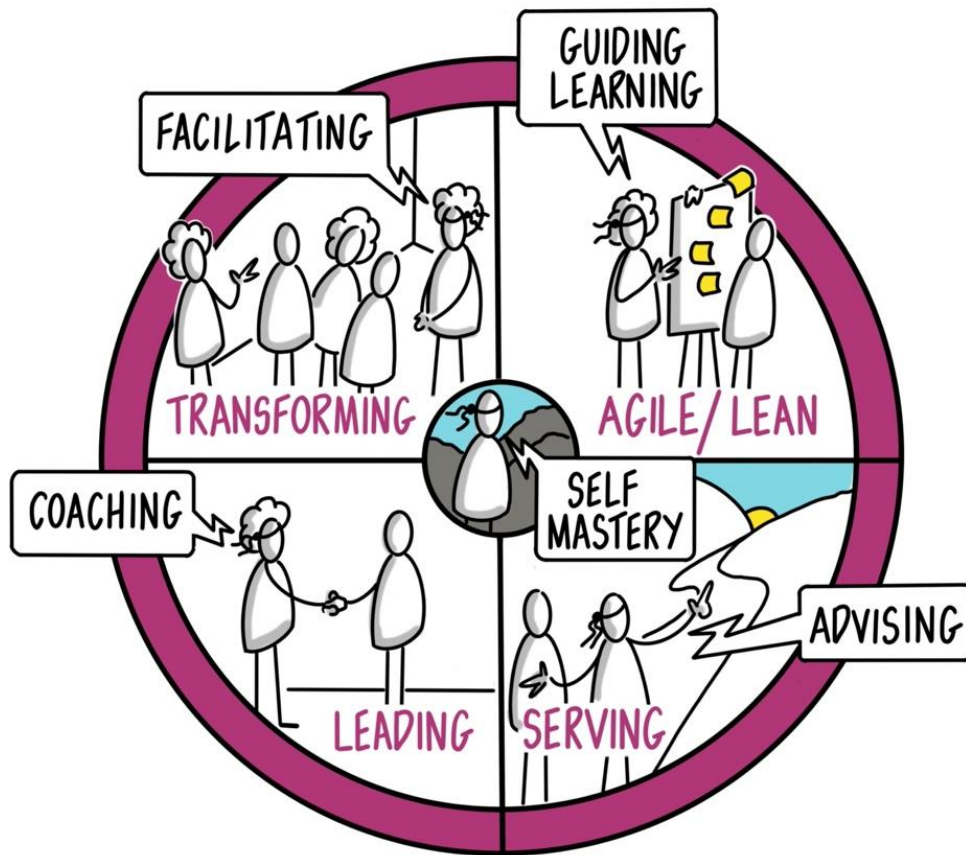# 1

Introduction to Badassery in Agile Coaching

First of all, welcome to our book. It's an honor to meet you and a privilege to help guide your agile coaching journey.

We hope this book sets the stage for badassery in your coaching journey and inspires you to pursue excellence in that worthwhile endeavor. We also hope that it establishes a baseline for what can be an incredibly fuzzy role in agile contexts by answering some crucial questions: What is an agile coach? What in the world do they do? And how do you become great at this role?

An Invitation

Dear agile coach,

You are focused on helping individuals and organizations rethink their way of working. This is an incredibly challenging job, but a beautiful one. You help your clients grow and learn as individuals, as teams, and as organizations.

You will rarely have any formal authority. But as an agile coach, you have informal authority, and you decide how you will wield it.

Will you influence people by being genuinely interested in them, connecting with them, helping them reflect, and finding their next steps in accordance with agile principles?

Are you open to rethinking your way of working? Are you coachable?

Do you have a genuine interest in people? If you care, your clients will care.

You help them stay open, withhold judgment, and overcome their assumptions, cognitive biases, and overconfidence cycles. This will require that you yourself withhold judgment, and be open to learning from everybody.

I invite you into this book. Please enter with an open mind and heart. We'll be sharing tools, tactics, strategies, approaches, stories, and experience that have worked for us; you will need to perform the situational heavy lifting of making it work for you and your clients.

Are you open to this challenge? Are you willing to change, learn, and grow?

Well, then, welcome to the path of becoming an Extraordinarily Badass Agile Coach.

We're glad you're here!

Why Extraordinarily Badass?

I asked a well-known agile consultant, author, and coach to write a foreword for me. He said no, and the primary reason he gave was that

he was uncomfortable with my use of the word badass. He even quoted some online definitions of the term in his reply. As I read them, I clearly saw his point. None were very complimentary or positive indicators of the competencies and skills I envision for an *Extraordinarily Badass Agile Coach*.

I'm not dwelling on that reply here, but it did inspire me to further explain my choice of words. While I can't change global definitions or individual reactions to the term *badass*, I can explain what being badass means to me, and my intent behind using the word in this book.

First, I use badass as an adjective. The online thesaurus Wordhippo says this implies "displaying outstanding skill, knowledge, and experience in a given field," and provides a long list of synonyms, including:

> expert, skilled, masterly, adept, proficient, adroit, accomplished, practiced, consummate, dexterous, deft, crackerjack, complete, artful, wicked good, formidable, nimble, agile, distinguished, top-notch, masterful, world-class, effective, admirable, dazzling, finished, exceptional, elite, marvelous, seasoned, well-versed, professional, outstanding, stellar, clever, gifted, competent.

I want to complement those adjectives with a few of my own:

> humble, resilient, reflective, curious, artful, playful, exuberant, joyous, dedicated, courageous, dogged, open-minded.

I realize I just inundated you with words, but I want to give you a broad and deep sense of my use and interpretation of *badass*. Each of these words indicates how I'm thinking about my coaching attitude and posture in relationship to my—and hopefully your—badass agile coaching journey.

Based on feedback from my colleagues and others, I seriously considered changing the title. But on deeper reflection, I decided that the *badass* theme throughout the book fully represents my vision and aspirations for you as a reader and a practicing agile coach.

You see, agile coaching isn't easy, nor is it for the faint of heart. It's full of frustrations, misinformation, bias, and pure change resistance. It's full of high client expectations that are often based on a

fundamental misunderstanding of what coaching is (and isn't). It's also full of hubris and imposters who are coaches in name only, looking more for money, title, and prestige than to serve their clients. In a word, agile coaching is *challenging*, because it deals with people, and people are often messy.

It's hard to stand out amid these challenges—to set yourself apart, to be an example.

I believe that only by being badass can you do that successfully. By being broadly skilled and well-balanced in your use of those skills, a craftsperson who looks at agile coaching as a lifelong journey of learning, growth, and client impact.

So, to all of you dedicated agile coaches and aspiring badasses, please read on, as I hope this book helps to grow your badassery. And the world, agile and otherwise, certainly needs more Badass Agile Coaches.

To all others, thank you for considering this journey. Now may be a good time to exit the aircraft.

Why Us?

The first question I want to answer for you is why you should trust my advice and that of my coauthors.

First, experience. We all have decades of real-world experience coaching real people (individuals, teams, groups, roles, organizations) in agile contexts. If you're looking for a lot of academic studies and references, unfortunately you'll have to look elsewhere. Here, we're sharing tried and true experience.

We'll focus on what has worked for us—models, canvases, tools, techniques, stances, approaches, mindsets, and learning modes. We'll share all of that with you with a stance of humble camaraderie in the hope you will join our community of Badass Agile Coaches.

I've been an agile coach for about 20 years and a Certified Enterprise Coach (CEC) with the Scrum Alliance since 2012. It's a select group; as of this writing there are only about 140 of us around the

world. I focus on being approachable and creating opportunities for fellow coaches to ask me for help, and I've usually been able to provide that help when they ask. I've been privileged to coach, train, and mentor so many agile coaches over the years that I often describe myself as a coach of coaches.

I also consider myself a well-rounded coach. One difference I bring to the table is experience in relatively senior leadership roles, which has given me insights into how to coach down, sideways, and importantly, up, to leadership.

But enough about me. Since this is a joint effort, let me share some background on the other key contributors.

Contributors

Multiple contributors have helped create this book for you. I'm grateful and honored to have the opportunity to work with such talented people on this project.

Jennifer Fields

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Jennifer began her agile journey as a developer and never looked back. Along the way she added to her agile toolbox by working in a variety of roles—project manager, Scrum Master, product owner, and agile leader—each helping to solidify and strengthen her agile mindset and coaching chops. Her wide-ranging experience and time spent at the senior leadership table give her a keen ability to work with folks across organizations, meeting them where they are to help them get to where they long to be.

Dedication: Thanks to Bob for investing in and supporting my journey.

Rhiannon Galen-Personick

www.linkedin.com/in/rhiannon-she-her-galen-personick-13aa99a/

Rhiannon comes from a different perspective, having spent the past 18 years as a social worker supporting child welfare. Rhiannon has worked both directly with clients and in a leadership role in several organizations. In her most recent role as a director of practice and professional development, she has worked alongside senior leadership and middle managers, supporting their growth through coaching and by being the energetic cheerleader we all need at times.

Rhiannon has worked extensively in the areas of diversity and race, creating curricula and training social workers on race consciousness, and helping many white social workers work toward a conscious acknowledgment of white privilege. Rhiannon has a deep passion for LGBTQIA+ advocacy, and assists her organization in developing workers who use inclusive practices.

Dedication: I would like to dedicate this book to my family—my amazing partner, Ben, and our two children, Vara and Mika—and to the amazing team of people who have helped shape me—Perquida, Katie, Jo, and Chantel!

Mark Summers

www.linkedin.com/in/markwsummers/

Mark Summers believes happiness always comes first. He has learned through experience that if people are having fun, then anything is possible.

Mark was one of the UK's first agile coaches and today is a leading figure in the ongoing story of agile coaching, a speaker at conferences, a leader of retreats, and a coach who never stops reflecting and evolving. If you're an agent of change, he believes you have to be on a continuous learning journey yourself.

Uncompromisingly honest with himself, energizing and thought-provoking as a coach, Mark is committed to helping people succeed by becoming happier, more open, and more autonomous as individuals and as teams.

Dedication: For my wife, Melanie, and our children, Lewis and Norah.

Mark contributed chapters 7, 8, and 9. He shared his direct experience co-creating the Agile Coaching Growth Wheel and several wonderfully detailed and nuanced coaching conversations to show you how to navigate the various stances within the Wheel.

Jennifer contributed chapters 14 and 15. She added even more coaching conversations, leveraging this book's Coaching Arc metaphor for her contextual coaching examples. You can *feel* her coaching presence and experience in the conversations.

Finally, Rhiannon contributed chapter 16, which is dedicated to situational and contextual thinking about diversity within and around your clients. I'm so thankful to include her unique perspective.

Each of these authors has added so much to the project and to the story we're trying to tell. Without them, this book would not provide the rich guide we hope we've created.

Goals for the Book

This book has four target audiences:

1. **Aspiring coaches**—folks who want to break into agile coaching and are looking for ways to develop, learn, and grow. I would

put Scrum Masters in this category, as coaching capabilities are an inherent part of excelling in that role.

2. **Practicing coaches**—folks who are looking to broaden their skills and competencies. I would put anyone who is looking to achieve the Scrum Alliance of CTC (Certified Team Coach) and CEC (Certified Enterprise Coach) in this category, and those pursuing similar coaching paths, particularly because these are well-rounded certifications with a focus on practiced skill.

3. **Master coaches**—folks who realize that the journey never ends and there is always something new to learn. This includes anyone who has the curiosity to look inside themselves, increasing their self-awareness, and the humility to keep growing and developing their coaching chops.

4. **Clients**—yes, clients! Since agile coaching is inherently confusing for those practicing it, imagine what it's like for our clients. This includes clients who are trying to hire or engage agile coaches and clients who don't know what to look for or how coaching works.

I know. That's a broad set of goals for a relatively short book. Which leads to one of the other goals for the book.

In any book, the author needs to make some early and fundamental decisions. Will the book be narrow or broad in coverage? Will it be shallow or deep in exploration? This, while also considering the overall length and approachability of the book.

I've decided to cast a broad net in this book, addressing every aspect of professional agile coaching that I think is relevant for achieving extraordinary badassery. Given that, I have chosen breadth over depth, and this book will not take many deeper dives in content. We'll leave that for you to pursue when you wish. At the end of each chapter, we'll share some relevant exploration points—books, articles, videos, and podcasts you can use to continue your journey.

Now, let's explore our understanding of what professional agile coaching is.

What Is Agile Coaching?

Please note that you will see the word *coach* or *coaching* a lot in this book. When you see either, we recommend you think *agile coaching*, simply because that's what the book is about. If we want you to think about, for example, *professional coaching* or the *professional coaching skills* instead, we have endeavored to use those words. So as a general rule, please assume we mean *agile coaching* unless we specifically say otherwise.

Now, let me start by establishing what agile coaching isn't. Professional badass agile coaching isn't:

- Family coaching
- Business coaching
- Personal coaching
- Therapy of any sort
- Just professional coaching
- Just consulting
- A place to complain or vent
- Sports coaching

Instead, it is a multivariate and multiskilled activity that includes some of the above but is unique in the coaching universe. 'That's probably why it's so confusing and so hard to define for so many.

An agile coach is a bit of a unicorn that is incredibly situational. As needed, they might choose to adopt the following *stances* with their clients:

- Mentor
- Teacher
- Consultant or advisor
- Modeler or exemplar
- Coach (in the professional coaching sense)
- Facilitator
- Evangelist (motivating or inspiring the client)

An agile coach will often switch between a few of these stances in a single coaching session. This is one of the most important distinctions

between an agile coach and a professional coach. A professional coach will largely stay within the coaching stance, while the agile coach is more situationally aware and able to switch stances to better meet the client's goals.

In that way, there is a sense-and-respond nature to the craft of agile coaching. Perhaps this story will help explain the difference. I was coaching a VP at a client not long ago. While I'd met this person several times, this was our first coaching session. I started by asking questions. The VP stopped me after a few minutes, appearing a bit frustrated, and said,

> My last agile coach only asked me questions. That's all they ever did over the course of six months of coaching. They never helped me with a challenge, never provided advice, never explored options with me, never helped me to better understand agility and the role I needed to play. It was simply question after question after question!
>
> Are you going to do that too?
>
> If so, I don't think this is going to work out. I engaged you because I need help. Your help. We're struggling here to successfully implement agile. Really struggling! And I understand that I need to be engaged and solving my own problems but, dammit, you're the expert in this space.
>
> So, I've got a question for you: Can you help me?

This is incredibly common. You might think this is a "problem client" or a leader who is looking for easy answers, but this is not a client problem. This is a coaching problem. Obviously, the previous agile coach had a single tool (or stance) in their toolbox—professional coaching. In that stance, they focused on client inquiry via powerful questions and client discovery of solutions, approaches, or alternatives.

If that is your only stance, then I'd argue that you're leaving clients like this one in your wake—clients you didn't serve well, didn't meet where they were, and didn't help. And I firmly believe that we need to and can do better than that!

But there's even more nuance to this unique form of coaching. The professional agile coach must also have broad and deep knowledge of lean practices, agile practices, tools, techniques, scaling models, and organizational models, among many other things.

Sounds challenging, doesn't it? Well, it is. That is, if you want to do it well. And just being good at it isn't the goal of this book. Instead, our goal is for you to become an

Extraordinarily Badass Agile Coach!

There, we said it. If we're going to do something, let's be badass at it.

Internal vs. External Coach

This book tries to stay focused on the art and craft of agile coaching independent of your role or title or whether you're a consultant, contractor, or employee operating as an agile coach.

But there are *huge* situational differences between coaching from the inside as an employee and coaching from the outside as a consulting coach. I want to acknowledge these differences.

One obvious difference is what I'll call *skin in the game*—internal coaches usually have more of it. And with this personal investment comes awareness of the political and power situations within their organizational cultures as they navigate the nuance of agile coaching. They also have to live with the outcomes of their coaching for far longer than most external coaches.

Another difference between internal and external coaches is in the privilege of the coach. You've all heard the story of an internal coach who has been making the same recommendation for six months to a year without their clients taking them seriously. Then one day an external consulting coach visits, makes the same recommendation, and everyone thinks it's the best idea on the planet.

The point I'm trying to make here is to stay aware of your organizational position (internal vs. external) when reading this book and applying the learning. What an external coach might try in two weeks,

an internal coach might decide to slow-play over the course of a year. Those situational, strategic coaching decisions are yours to make—unapologetically—based on your own *organizational contexts.*[1]

Certainly, I want you to become an Extraordinarily Badass Agile Coach, but I also want you to be aware of your contexts, role, privilege, risks, and rewards. In other words, I want you to stay safe too.

The Client

Another definition that's important is who is being coached. Depending on who that is, their role, the situation, and the context, the coaching can be quite different. Figure 1 defines my I's of client awareness for agile coaching—what I, as an agile coach, need the client to understand and support as part of our coaching relationship.

Establishing role clarity around the client and the coach is an important step in establishing the coaching relationship.

I am not your …	I will …	I need your …
• leader or boss • decision-maker or stakeholder • judge or evaluator • pal or friend • cheerleader	• guide you and give you feedback • suggest things for you to try or test • hold up a mirror • challenge you, maybe even call you out	• relationship • permission and trust • openness and consideration • engagement • action

FIGURE 1. The I's of Client Awareness for Agile Coaching

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1.   There's a more thorough treatment of all of the aspects for internal versus external coach roles in the Badass Agile Coaching Repo (registration link in the afterword).

Throughout the book we're going use the term *client* to refer to the person or group being coached. It could imply

- an individual,
- a team,
- a group,
- an organizational silo or function,
- the entire leadership team,
- a specific role (Scrum Master, leader, stakeholder, product manager, etc.),
- your sponsor, or
- anyone you are serving.

Professional agile coaching can apply to individuals or groups. Again, we want to be directionally aware of the roles and adjust our approaches and stances accordingly, but we need the nimbleness to respond quickly to a wide variety of client contexts.

Badassery as an Agile Coach

Another driver for writing the book is our fundamental belief that there is far too much mediocrity in the world of agile coaching. One way to measure this is the sheer number of agile coaches popping up every day. It seems as if all it takes to hang out your coaching shingle is a couple of classes and a series of certification letters after your name. If anything, the problem is increasing over time as more and more people want to cash in on the agile wave.

Someone told me just the other day that they did a LinkedIn search for the term *agile coach* and got 240,000 matches—nearly a quarter of a million potential coaches.

I'd argue that very few are badasses.

One of the major enablers for this trend is the lack of a clear definition of agile coaching. We hope to provide some of that missing clarity by using the Agile Coaching Growth Wheel as a central model in this book. We'll explore it much more in section II. But we'll also emphasize the breadth of skill required across all aspects of the Wheel, with

an emphasis on what deepening your skills within each stance might entail.

A final driver for this book is establishing a higher bar for what *good* looks like—badassery, if you will—in professional agile coaching. For example, I don't think it's good enough to be accomplished or expert at just one or two stances. You have to work hard to be broad, balanced, and skilled as a badass coach, with an emphasis on breadth.

To paint an image of badassery for you, here are a few key attributes we think of in professional Extraordinarily Badass Agile Coaches:

- We walk our talk, even under pressure or when no one is looking.
- We meet our clients with a mindset of respect, service, and gratitude for the opportunity.
- We have the courage to speak truth to power (even if that power pays us).
- We continuously strive to learn and grow as coaches, adding competency across *all* of the coaching stances.
- We are coachable (and have at least one ongoing coach).
- We are mentored and we mentor, and we fundamentally understand the value of mentoring.
- We strive to continuously improve our communication capabilities—including our storytelling.
- We have or align with a code of ethics and we hold to those ethics in all aspects of our coaching journey.
- We realize that professional coaching, while incredibly valuable, is only one stance to be used when appropriate in specific contexts.
- We respect the client and meet them where they are, not where we want them to be.
- We respect leaders and leadership, not falling into the common agile anti-pattern of judging up and blaming up.
- We not only coach individuals, we endeavor to be systems thinkers and system aware, and to coach the system wherever appropriate.

- We approach coaching as an inside-out endeavor, first focusing on our own self-awareness and behavior before looking (and coaching) outward.
- We maintain our humility, easily show our vulnerability, and realize that we need to serve.
- We make and take the time for personal reflection and self-care.
- We are intensely curious and powerful listeners, even to what is unsaid.

Does that list resonate with you? Excite you? We sure hope so. You'll explore all of those ideas and many more throughout this book. We encourage you to keep this image of badassery in the back of your mind as you read.

A Badass Character

I also want to introduce you to an important character in the book (see figure 2). You'll see them in the sketches throughout the text. They can surface as ninja or sensei in the sketches (look for the headband), indicating they are operating as Extraordinarily Badass Agile Coaches.

I want them to be a continuous visual reminder (and motivator) of how you can develop mastery and badassery in agile coaching.

FIGURE 2. Our badass coaching character

Suggested Reading Flow

There are four primary sections in the book:

    I. Agile Coaching Basics
   II. Agile Coaching Models and Practice
  III. Nuanced Agile Coaching
  IV. Continuous Learning

If you're an **aspiring coach**, we recommend that you read the book as presented, from beginning to end. You'll probably find the most value in that order.

If you're a **practicing coach**, we recommend beginning with chapter 2, on mindset, and then perhaps going right to section II. We also recommend that you do a detailed skills assessment using the Comparative Agility Agile Coaching Personal Improvement (PI) survey to determine your balance across the Wheel and craft your journey based on the skill gaps you find. There's more information and an access link in the afterword.

If you're a **master coach**, we recommend first surveying the table of contents and looking for ideas that pique your interest. You might also try reading the headings within each chapter, as they give you a good idea of the focus within each. And we'd certainly recommend reviewing the materials on the Wheel, the Coaching dojo, and the arc of a coaching conversation. But keep in mind that although you might think of yourself as a master, we all have something to learn in our journey toward being an Extraordinarily Badass Agile Coach.

Finally, if you're a curious **client**, we recommend reading chapters 3, 4, 5, 12, and 18. This should give you a solid sense of the important role that you play in your coaching and what excellence looks like in your agile coaches.

Stay agile and stay badass, my friends.

Bob Galen, Jennifer Fields, Rhiannon Galen-Personick,
and Mark Summers
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